TESTIMONY OF JEFFREY W. NELSON
DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.

REPRESENTING THE VIEWS OF:

ARCHERY TRADE ASSOCIATION, BOWHUNTING PRESERVATION ALLIANCE, DUCKS UNLIMITED, INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES, IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA, NATIONAL WILD TURKEY FEDERATION, NORTH AMERICAN GROUSE PARTNERSHIP, PHEASANTS FOREVER, SAFARI CLUB INTERNATIONAL, TEXAS WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION THEODORE ROOSEVELT CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP, WHITETAILS UNLIMITED, AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

BEFORE THE:

U.S. SENATE, COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY, CONSERVATION AND RURAL REVITALIZATION

CONCERNING:
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM, A VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION PROGRAM FOR AGRICULTURAL LANDOWNERS

JULY 27, 2005
WASHINGTON, DC

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Jeff Nelson. I am the Director of Ducks Unlimited's (DU) Great Plains Regional Office in Bismarck, North Dakota. I am a professional biologist with training in wetland and waterfowl ecology. I have worked for DU since 1982 in both Canada and the U.S., initially as a research biologist and eventually as Chief Biologist for our organization. I currently lead a staff of about 70 professionals working in eight states including Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Montana.

Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937 by concerned and farsighted sportsmen and conservationists. It has grown from a handful of people to an organization of over 1,000,000 supporters who now make up the largest wetlands and waterfowl conservation organization in the world. DU has conserved over 11 million acres of wildlife habitat in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. We pride ourselves on our cooperative work with private landowners, assisting them in meeting their economic and production goals while providing high quality habitat for the wildlife that depend on their land for survival.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today, not only as a representative of Ducks Unlimited, but also on behalf of a group of sportsmen-conservation organizations. These organizations represent a variety of conservation and sporting interests that have come together as users and supporters of critical programs like CRP. The groups that I represent today include Archery Trade Association, Bowhunting Preservation Alliance, Ducks Unlimited, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Izaak Walton League of America, National Wild Turkey Federation, North American Grouse Partnership, Pheasants Forever, Safari Club International, Texas Wildlife Association, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Whitetails Unlimited, and Wildlife Management Institute. Collectively, our members and supporters represent a sizable cross-section of our nation's citizenry. We are pleased to have the opportunity to share with the committee our views on the importance of CRP. Indeed, no USDA program in history has done more for landscape-level conservation of soil, water, and wildlife habitat while providing landowners with stable and diversified income than CRP.

Over the past two decades, the Conservation Reserve Program has played an integral role in the economic vitality and general well being of our nation's farmers and ranchers. The increased role and importance of conservation in agriculture, and its role in private lands stewardship, has led to consensus and partnerships among government and private interests including commodity groups, individual producers, livestock organizations, and the wildlife conservation community.

Voluntary, incentive-based conservation provisions like CRP have provided the framework for "win-win" solutions on the farm and across the rural and urban landscapes. Congress recognized the success of and demand for these conservation programs when it passed the 2002 Farm Bill with an 80% increase above the baseline for the conservation title. Specifically, the acreage cap for CRP was increased in an attempt to keep up with producer demand for programs like CRP, where demand is exceeding availability by a 3:1 ratio. This is discussed in further detail in my testimony.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM (CRP)
Wildlife Benefits Are Proven

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has conserved more of our nation's soil, water, and wildlife than any other program in history. The 2002 Farm Bill increased the acreage cap on CRP from 36.4 to 39.2 million acres, with the clear implication that an additional 2.8 million acres of CRP contracts should be available to producers.

CRP not only reduces erosion, saving taxpayer funds but it also provides habitat for many species of wildlife across the country. It has been especially important where cropland had replaced grassland on marginal soils. Across the plains states of the central U.S., grassland loss continues at alarming rates. In the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region (which includes portions of Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa, North Dakota, and Montana), 56 million acres (62%) of the original 90 million acres of native grassland have been converted to other land uses. The 4.7 million acres of CRP within this landscape have helped to restore the wildlife, soil, and water quality benefits provided by grassland. However, more grassland restoration through CRP is needed to achieve a level of sustainability of these public benefits.

CRP is a proven, results-oriented conservation program that has accomplished a variety of positive outcomes for wildlife habitat. Science has shown that putting land into CRP has resulted in measurable benefits to wildlife populations in many areas of the country. Here are a few examples of this type of research:

- During 1992-1997, nesting success of five common duck species was 46% higher with CRP on the landscape in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana compared to a simulated scenario where existing CRP was replaced with cropland (Reynolds et al. 2001). This study concluded that an additional 12.4 million recruits were added to the waterfowl fall flight as a result of CRP from 1992-1997.

- During 1990-1994, nest success of female pheasants in north central Iowa was 40% higher in large blocks of CRP than in smaller, fragmented nesting cover types like roadsides and fence lines (Clark and Bogenschutz 1999). When CRP acreage was enrolled in large fields, pheasant populations were 53% greater compared to no CRP (Clark and Bogenschutz 2001)

- Fall pheasant populations in South Dakota have increased from 1.4 million to 6.1 million because of CRP(Wildlife Management Institute, 2001)

- Based on densities of 12 grassland songbird species in CRP fields compared to adjacent croplands, Johnson and Igl (1995) predicted that populations of at least five of these species would decline statewide in North Dakota by 17% or more if CRP was greatly reduced on the state's landscape.

These studies document the positive impacts of CRP on wildlife populations. Overall, the collection of scientific evidence demonstrates that CRP has been a major contributor to helping many species of waterfowl rebound to record levels following the return of precipitation to the northern prairies in 1993. This impact of CRP on waterfowl populations is further substantiated by comparisons with the Canadian prairies, where waterfowl nesting success and population growth remains low and CRP and other conservation cover programs are lacking. CRP has been a boon to pheasant and white-tailed deer populations throughout the plains states and the Midwest. Non-game grassland birds, one of the fastest declining groups of birds in the country, have also responded positively to the habitat afforded by CRP, staving off declines that could lead to increased listings of threatened and endangered species.

AGRICULTURE PRODUCERS BENEFIT FROM CRP

CRP has helped many farmers diversify their income sources by incorporating grass-based agriculture and recreation-based businesses into their operations. Some have decided to use CRP to help make the transition from cropping to ranching. Hundreds of farmers in the Dakotas and Iowa have restored formerly drained wetlands within their CRP tracts through practice CP-23. Others are using available incentive programs to install grazing systems on expiring CRP. Many are using CRP payments to stabilize their financial situation and to pay off debt. As of May 2003, portions of more than 400,000 farms have enrolled in CRP across the nation. CRP remains very popular in prairie states like Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota, where portions of over 20,000 farms in each of these states have enrolled in CRP. As noted earlier, generally the supply of CRP often falls short of demand by a 3:1 ratio. During the last general signup (Signup 26) this ratio was even higher in several Prairie Pothole states. In Montana only 24% of 2,293 offers were accepted, in North Dakota only 9% of 3,003 offers were accepted, and in South Dakota only 15% of 2,002 offers were accepted. Clearly CRP remains a very popular program among agricultural operators.

U.S. taxpayers are benefiting from cleaner air and improved water quality, because CRP removes greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and reduces soil erosion and nutrient runoff into our waterways. Recovering wildlife populations are enjoyed by sportsmen and wildlife watchers across the nation, generating millions of dollars and jobs for rural economies. Additionally, increasing wildlife populations are helping to diversify income sources for farmers, who are responding to strong demand for fee hunting opportunities by operating hunting-related businesses. Many producers also have opened up the land they have enrolled in CRP to public access for hunting and fishing, thus improving the relationship between landowners, state fish and wildlife agencies and the hunting and fishing public.

THE MYTH OF CRP KILLING RURAL ECONOMIES

One common misconception is that CRP has been causing the population decline of rural America by removing cropland from production. In fact, when one examines the data, it is clear that rural population decline and the decline in the number of farms across the America started decades before CRP ever entered the picture. For example, in North Dakota, the decline in farm numbers started in the 1930's and abated somewhat during the mid-1980's, corresponding with

the introduction of CRP in 1986 (Fig. 1). A similar, long-term trend in declining farm numbers is evident in South Dakota, Louisiana, Kansas, and Indiana (Fig. 2).

Deleted: CRP in

In addition, when one looks to prairie Canada where there is no CRP-type program, the same trends of declining farm numbers and rural population decline are evident (Fig. 3). These and other data indicate that factors other than CRP are driving the decline in farm numbers and rural populations.

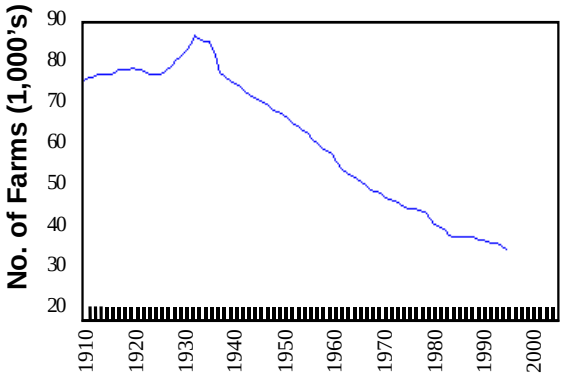


Fig. 1. The number of farms in North Dakota, 1910-97. ***CRP started in 1986***

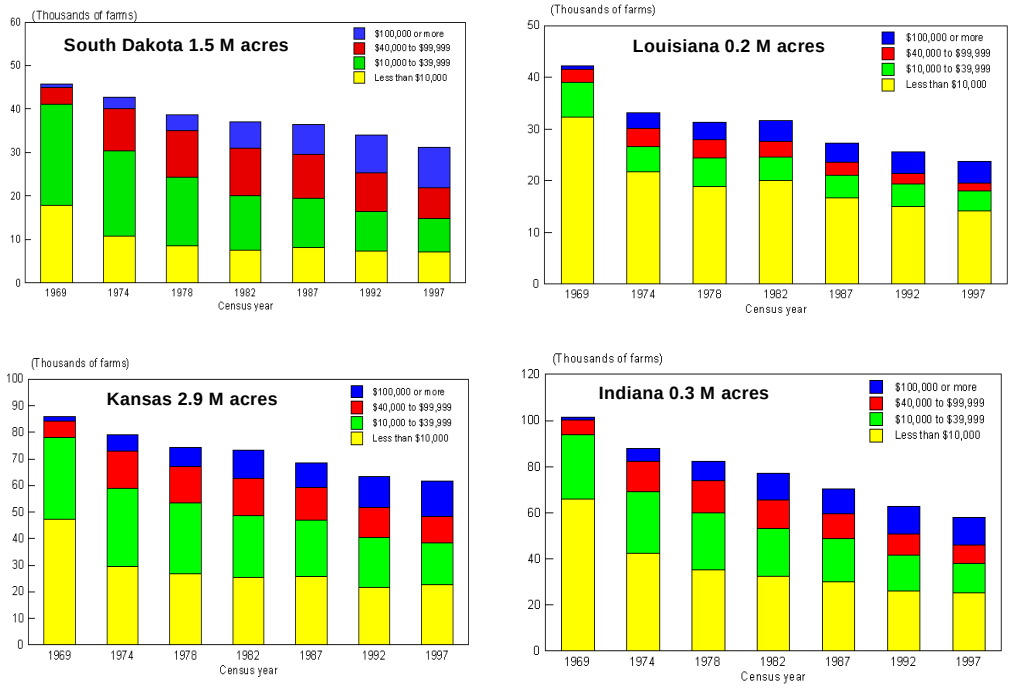


Fig. 2. Trends in farms numbers and size in four, central U.S. states, 1969-97. ***Those that blame CRP for rural and farm decline are inaccurate***

Several prominent economists have demonstrated that through the advances in agricultural equipment, crop breeding, and other technology, a farmer can now cultivate many more acres than was possible in the past. These technological developments have allowed the American farmer to compete in the world markets where land and labor cost are much lower. On the other hand, new industries are emerging that are founded on the multiple benefits provided by grasslands, including those restored through CRP. These include nature-based tourism and associated small businesses that accommodate visitors. Thus, instead of CRP being viewed as contributing to the decline of rural America, it holds promise in helping to restore quality natural landscapes around which new and diversified service sector and small business jobs can be based.

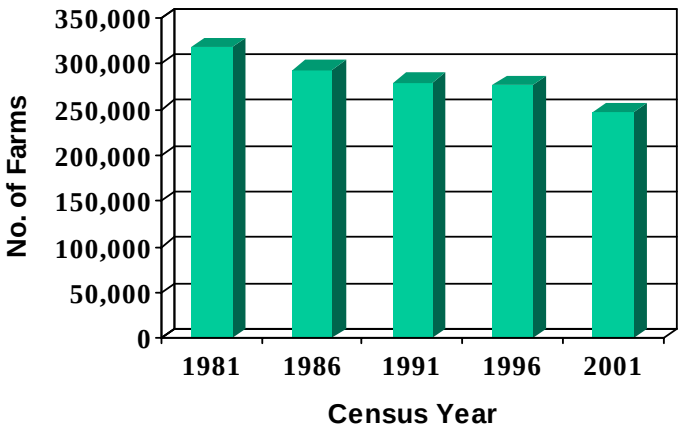


Fig. 3. Trends in the number of farms in Canada, 1981-2001. ***Where no CRP exists***

CRP AT ITS FINEST: THE U.S. PRAIRIE POTHOLE REGION

Nowhere has CRP provided more obvious benefits than the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region (PPR). Most of the 4.7 million acres of CRP in the PPR is enrolled in large blocks of grassland that protect highly erodible soils, filter runoff, recharge aquifers, and provide ample habitat for grassland wildlife. Participants typically enroll a portion of their farm in CRP, which helps them to diversify their operations, stabilize their income, and develop new sources of revenue. Ducks that are captured and banded in the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region are recovered by hunters from almost

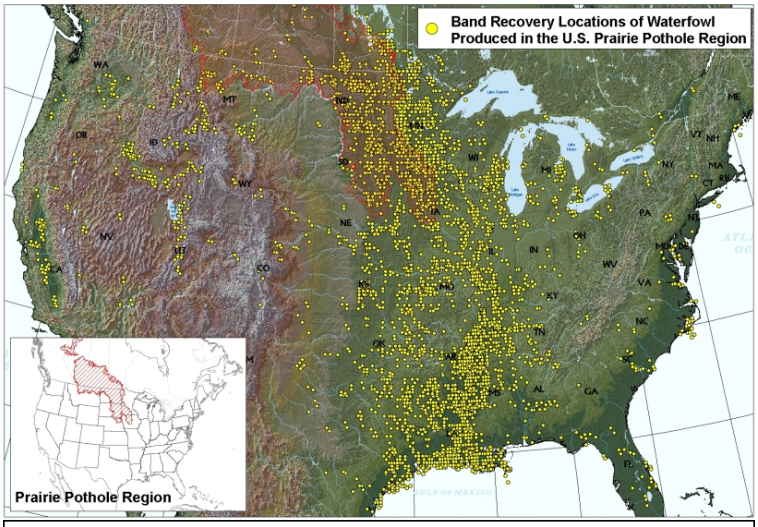


Fig. 4. Band recovery locations (yellow dots) of ducks produced in the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region.

every state in the U.S. (Fig. 4). These hunters, along with countless wildlife viewers, are benefited by the additional 2 million ducks per year that are produced because of CRP.

CRP CONTRACTS ARE NEARING AN END

In 2007, over 16 million acres of CRP contracts terminate their enrollment (Fig. 5), with an additional 6 million acres expiring the following year. CRP should continue as USDA's flagship conservation program, and be reauthorized with a focus on enhancing and expanding the existing CRP "wildlife legacy". Given all of the benefits of CRP to producers, the environment, and the American public, we cannot afford the loss of CRP authorization in the next Farm Bill. Such a loss would negate many of the documented wildlife and other environmental benefits that resulted from CRP over the past 20 years.

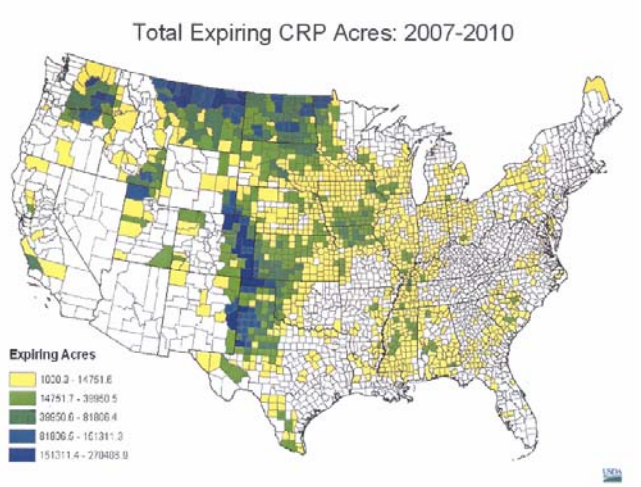


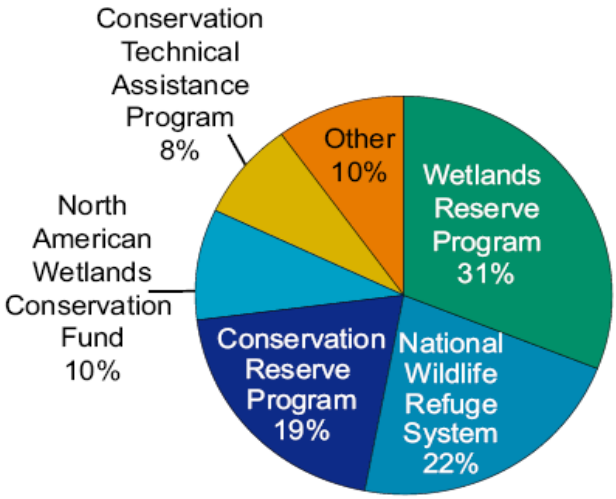
Fig. 5. Acres of CRP expiring during 2007-2010.

Management of CRP grasslands can be an important tool to maintain and enhance wildlife productivity throughout the contract period. Provisions for managed haying and grazing, mid-contract management, and the setting of primary nesting/brood-rearing seasons should allow for regional variations and be driven by a goal of protecting and enhancing resource benefits. In some regions of the country, more frequent disturbance of CRP may be necessary (e.g. every two or three years in much of the South and East), while over much of the northern and southern plains management may only be needed once or twice during a ten-year contract. We recognize that much of the CRP "wildlife legacy" can be directly attributed to large blocks of grassland in the upper Midwest, but note that additional efforts are necessary to ensure that this wildlife legacy is shared nationwide, especially in the southeastern section of the country where cover establishment and management on CRP lands has not achieved the expected wildlife benefits.

We support the continued use of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), and (CCRP), which are valuable tools in providing resource benefits in many areas of the country. As one portion of that we support the USDA's involvement with the Northern Bobwhite Quail Conservation Initiative, and encourage the Department's continued efforts to targeted improvements to bobwhite quail habitat needs.

On April 22, 2004, in celebration of the 35th Earth Day, President Bush announced an aggressive new national goal of moving beyond a policy of "no net loss" of wetlands to an overall increase of wetlands in America over the next five years. Because the lower 48 states in the U.S. have

lost approximately 52% of their original wetlands, this bold new policy will move the nation beyond just stopping overall wetland loss to increasing the vital functions of absorbing floodwaters, improving water quality, buffering coastal erosion, and enhancing wildlife habitat for hundreds of species. Achieving this goal will require cooperation and diligence in protecting further wetland loss though regulatory and disincentive programs, and encouraging wetland gains through incentive programs like the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) and the conservation title of the Farm Bill, in particular the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).



Proportion of Wetland Acres Anticipated to be Created or Restored by Major Programs in FY 2006 (Conserving America's Wetlands Implementing the President's Goal, April 2005 CEQ report,

CONCLUSION

Recap of proven benefits delivered from CRP

The Conservation Reserve Program is a critical tool for the long-term conservation of soil, water, and wildlife habitat, and also ensures a sound financial base for agriculture. The majority of the wetlands, grasslands, and bottomland forests that originally existed in the U.S. have been lost. Many species of grassland and wetland wildlife continue to decline, many streams and rivers continue to fall below water quality standards, and organic matter continues to be depleted from agriculture soils as a result of cultivation. Unfortunately, given the habitat deficit that existed when the 1985 Conservation Title was initiated, our nation's conservation work is far from complete.

Scientific studies demonstrate that CRP is resulting in measurable positive impacts on our nation's wildlife resources, and that it is not responsible for the decline of rural economies. Yet the funding and available acreage for conservation title programs continues to fall woefully short of demand. In some key areas of the country, almost 70% of farmers who want to enroll in CRP are turned away. Producers and rural communities want more access to programs like CRP. The documented interest in CRP by farmers and ranchers speaks loud and clear. These producers desire a much higher level of conservation program funding and acreage availability than our nation is currently providing to restore their marginal lands to more sustainable uses, diversify

their economic base, and improve environmental conditions on land under their stewardship. Simply put, we are not meeting their demand for assistance with their conservation efforts. These are the people who make up our rural communities, who are working the land, and who are the primary constituents of our nation's Farm Bill. We need to acknowledge these facts and look to better meet the demand for conservation title programs in the future. This can be done while meeting the legitimate needs for supporting the production of our nation's food and fiber. This Subcommittee will play a vital role in ensuring that the conservation needs of America's agricultural producers are met.

It is our view that full implementation the Conservation Reserve Program can provide necessary conservation of soil, water, and wildlife resources, while protecting and enhancing our farmers' ability to produce abundant and safe food supplies. In order for the full benefits of these programs to be realized, funding levels must allow producers access to the program levels authorized by Congress in 2002, and maintained in the 2007 Farm Bill.

The President has met with many of our groups leaders. He spoke of his strong support for wildlife conservation and of our groups' collective efforts at maintaining and enhancing America's wildlife heritage. The President voiced support for voluntary, incentive-based programs such as the Conservation and Wetlands Reserve Programs. He echoed that support in Minnesota where he stated to a group of farmers, ranchers, and sportsmen-conservationists his desire to see the legacy of CRP continue. Ducks Unlimited and the groups we are representing today stand ready to work with Congress and the Administration to continue the CRP legacy. It is our hope that we can work with the members of this Subcommittee as you craft a new generation of farm legislation. We have numerous success stories from across this nation told by America's farmers, ranchers, and sportsmen that document the proven success of CRP. We offer our assistance not only in helping to deliver this program to our nations' farmers and ranchers, but in continuing to make policy improvements that will build upon our success stories.

We would be remiss if we didn't note that representatives of many of our organizations have worked with numerous offices of both the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. While we don't always agree on solutions to issues, we believe that continuing dialogue is critical to maximizing program implementation for resource benefits, and we acknowledge and thank our colleagues in these agencies for their willingness to listen and work with us.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments as you deliberate the role and future of conservation programs like CRP. I hope we have made the case that maintaining the Conservation Reserve Program is integral to a successful and balanced farm policy. The long-term health of our country and its citizens requires a thoughtful balance between commodity production and conservation of our natural resources. We can lead the world in agriculture production while we maintain and improve our environment at the same time. The road to successfully achieving those goals starts with this Subcommittee.

Please do not hesitate to call upon us for any reason regarding these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.